



# Songs & Silences

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Songs & Silences

A Performance by Amos Ben-Tal/OFF Projects

Seen on December 9, 2023, at Frascati Theatre Amsterdam.

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The feeling of curiousness builds up when we gathered in the hall before the entrance of the space. For this new performance by Amos Ben-Tal, each audience member registered for a specific start time, creating space and time of individual exploration. As we waited, it was revealed that the program could be experienced at our own pace. The doors would open every fifteen minutes for thirty seconds, allowing a new group to enter, shift places, or exit—a personalized journey through the performance.

When my time slot started, I entered a large space where remnants of prior audiences lingered on black stools scattered across the floor. The vintage ambiance of the space transported me into an old movie scene, reminiscent of a train station waiting hall, as I would sit and watch people how they pass by, witnessing lives and everyday live events. The setup of this performance blurred the distinctions between spectator and performer and uncertainty hung in the air until someone rose from a stool and began to dance...

The dancer moved along the walls of the performance space, revealing the varied perspectives of each spectator. At a certain point another dancer joined, mirroring movements from the opposite side. Their journey led them through the labyrinth formed by empty spaces between stools, effectively breaking the traditional boundaries between performer and spectator. This dynamic interaction not only challenged the conventional roles but also conveyed, as Amos Ben-Tal articulated in the performance booklet, “each from our own perspective, yet very much together in the experience”. This resonates with André Lepecki's concept of *singularity* of an event, wherein the dance becomes a manifestation of being singular in relation to others. Lepecki's notion of “not being individual” finds expression in the dance, poems, songs and guitar pieces (performed live by Amos himself) creating a hypnotic mosaic and transforming the performance into a collective event—“a gathering of pasts and futures in the shared urgency of the collective now”<sup>1</sup>

Rather than following a linear narrative, the performance unfolded in a series of moments—dance, music and text. The exciting use of space, where the dancers are often only centimetres away from their audience, creating an immersive experience, as I experienced when in the third round a dancer suddenly emerged next to me. I could sense the dancer's movements as a gentle breeze, and their arm brushed across my head, touching my hair. This made the event feel personal and captivating. This innovative form of spectatorship redefines the traditional boundaries between performer and audience, creating a dynamic social event where spectators actively choose their vantage points. As Claire Bishop notes, “Events are not frontal — they can be seen from all sides — and audiences can be itinerant, even though, in actuality, they tend to be static.”<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon aligns with Bishop's concept of '*dance exhibition*,' which she identifies as the

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<sup>1</sup> Lepecki, A. (2016). “Afterthought: four notes on witnessing performance in the age of neoliberal dis-experience” in *Singularities: Dance in the age of performance*. London and New York: Routledge, 170-176.

<sup>2</sup> Claire Bishop, C. (2018) “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention”, *TDR*: 62:2, 22-42.

quintessential manifestation of the contemporary '*gray zones*' for performance. These gray zones emerge from the historical convergence of experimental theatre's '*black box*' and the gallery's '*white cube*,' challenging conventional notions of how performance is presented and experienced.<sup>3</sup>

Direct eye contact between dancers and audience members initiated spontaneous exchanges—a smile, a shift in gaze, a subtle repositioning—making the performance a living, evolving entity. The proximity of the dancers made the event feel truly present, crafted in the here and now. The dance sequences intertwined with musical interludes, both instrumental and vocal, drawing attention to the musician positioned in a corner. Annabelle Hinam's rapid recitation of the poem "Kill the Victor" left only a few key words lingering. Yet, in the subsequent solo, the text resurfaced through movements that visually echoed the narrative. Fragments of the poem returned in sung form, adding layers to the performance.

The climax of the evening unfolded as a soloist was joined by another dancer, and another, and another... until a group of five dancers repeated movements like a chorus in a song. Dynamic, pulsating and repeating. Same phrase, different directions. In this moment, with multiple dancers weaving through the performance, it became a delightful challenge to decide where to direct one's gaze. In this way, *Songs & Silences*, can be seen as an exploration of democratic space, collective experience, and the challenging of hierarchies. The performance, characterized by its unique temporal structure and notion of space, echoes the democratization of social organization advocated by Ana Vujanović's concept of '*landscape dramaturgy*'.

Landscape dramaturgy refers to a new paradigm in performing arts that challenges traditional notions of space, narrative, and audience-performer dynamics. In this context, the space becomes a dynamic field where diverse

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

experiences coexist, rejecting the traditional hierarchy of upfront and background.<sup>4</sup> The deliberate blurring of roles between spectator and performer, as individuals explore their own perspectives within the shared space, aligns with Vujanović's idea of challenging the one-point view and proposing a shared view. As the performers moved dynamically through the space, breaking free from the constraints of a linear narrative, the performance unfolded as a democratic exploration of collective space and shared experience. This proposition for multiplying personal views and challenging the one-point view emphasizes the multiplicity of perspectives within a shared space. Also, the intentional departure from a linear narrative and the rejection of a single, centralized narrative creates an environment where meaning is not predefined, and the audience is invited to navigate and interpret their own experiences.

The experience, with its unconventional structure and intimate proximity, transformed the theatre into a living, breathing entity, much like a collective consciousness. Remarkably enough, as the performance concluded, it was notable only a small applause was given, like an anti-climax, and people just walked out. It felt like the "train station waiting hall" as I described in the beginning, where individuals just come and go, and then move on again. The vintage allure of the waiting hall, where lives intersected fleetingly, became a metaphor for the intricate web of perspectives woven in the performance space. Songs & Silences invited the audience to navigate a multiplicity of perspectives, rejecting predefined meanings and embracing individual interpretations. In this way, Songs & Silences emerges not just as a remarkable proposal on the evolution of contemporary performance but as a transformative journey, challenging us to reconsider our position in the intricate tapestry of shared existence.

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<sup>4</sup> Vujanovic, A. (2018) "Landscape dramaturgy: Space after perspective", Fiksdal, I (ed.), Thinking Alongside, The Oslo National Academy of the Arts: Oslo, 2018